Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom

November 24, 2014

The President. Thank you so much. And, everybody, have a seat. Well, welcome to the White House. This is one of my favorite events. Once a year, we set aside this event to celebrate people who have made America stronger and wiser and more humane and more beautiful with our highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. This year we honor 18. Unfortunately, Stephen Sondheim could not be with us today. I'm going to be presenting him with this award at our 2015 ceremony.

We give thanks to public servants who have devoted their lives to their fellow citizens. When Edward Roybal told Speaker Tip O'Neill that he was starting a Congressional Hispanic Caucus, there were so few Hispanics in Congress that Tip joked they could fit the whole caucus in a phone booth. But Edward saw beyond the times.

As a Congressman from Los Angeles for 30 years, he fought for bilingual education, bilingual proceedings in our judicial system, and to make sure Hispanic Americans counted—literally. Thanks to him, the Caucus—the Census was revised to more accurately count Latinos. Although his roots in America went back hundreds of years, he championed the cause of immigrants and spoke up for vulnerable communities and was one of few in the early 1980s calling for more AIDS research. He left us nearly a decade ago, but Edward Roybal was and remains a hero to so many, not just Latinos, but all Americans.

Every girl in Little League, every woman playing college sports, and every parent—including Michelle and myself—who watches their daughter on a field or in the classroom is forever grateful to the late Patsy Takemoto Mink. I am particularly grateful because she was my Congresswoman for a long time. [*Laughter*]

Denied admission to medical school because she was a woman, Patsy went on to law school and coauthored title IX, banning gender discrimination in our schools. Patsy was many "firsts," including the first woman of color in Congress, and to those of us in Hawaii, she represented the very best of public service and the Aloha spirit.

And if she was a first, she dedicated her life to making sure that she would not be the last. From championing civil rights to fighting for gender—fighting against gender discrimination, Patsy was a passionate advocate for opportunity, equality, and realizing the full promise of the American Dream.

When John Dingell's father, a New Deal Democrat, passed away in 1955, John stepped up. And over the course of six decades, a congressional career longer than any in history, John built a peerless record of his own. He gaveled in the vote for Medicare, helped lead the fight for the Civil Rights Act. For more than half a century, in every single Congress, John introduced a bill for comprehensive health care. That is, until he didn't have to do it anymore. [*Laughter*] And—[*applause*].

I could not have been prouder to have John by my side when I signed the Affordable Care Act into law. John will retire at the end of this session, but at 88, he's still going strong. And his life reminds us that change takes time; it takes courage and persistence. But if we push hard enough and long enough, change is possible.

As a University of Chicago student, Abner Mikva stopped by the local Democratic headquarters and asked to volunteer. And I love this story. A committeeman asked, "Who sent you?" and Ab said, "Nobody." And the committeeman said, "We don't want nobody nobody sent." [*Laughter*] That's Chicago for you. [*Laughter*]

Despite that abrupt dismissal, Ab went on to devote his life to public service: reformed Illinois's criminal code, defended free speech and consumer rights; in 1993, stuck down—struck down the Pentagon's ban on gays in the military. He was overturned on that one, but history proved him right. And he inspired the next generation, including me.

After I graduated from law school, he offered me the chance to be his law clerk. I declined, but was extraordinarily grateful, and he forgave me—[*laughter*]—for which I was also grateful. Ab transcends any single moment in recent political history. But he had a hand in shaping some of the best of it. So we've got some extraordinary public servants on this stage.

We also give thanks for innovators who've changed our world. Mildred Dresselhaus's high school yearbook contained commentary from her classmates. They printed a mathematical tribute: "Mildred equals brains plus fun. In math and science, she's second to none." [*Laughter*]

Growing up in New York during the Great Depression, this daughter of Polish immigrants had three clear paths open to her: teaching, nursing, and secretarial school. Somehow, she had something else in mind. And she became an electrical engineer and a physicist and rose in MIT's ranks, performed groundbreaking experiments on carbon, became one of the world's most celebrated scientists. And her influence is all around us: in the cars we drive, the energy we generate, the electronic devices that power our lives. When she arrived at MIT in 1960, only 4 percent of students were women. Today, almost half are, a new generation walking the path that Millie blazed.

Robert Solow's father was a businessman who handled a lot of documents. And when Robert became an economist, his dad joked, we do the same thing: deliver papers. [*Laughter*] But Bob's influence extends far beyond the page. More than just about any living economist, he has shaped economic policy, and with it, the lives of people everywhere. His insights into how technological progress drives growth transformed our thinking about how to build prosperity, leading to more investments in research and education—in other words, more investments in people.

When he won the Nobel Prize, a colleague wrote, "Economists' faces lit up all over the world." And this isn't exactly an irrationally exuberant group, economists. [*Laughter*] They don't usually get real fired up. [*Laughter*] But Bob isn't just admired by his peers, he is adored. And he continues to be a leading voice on the economic challenges of our times, especially when it comes to reversing income inequality and growing the economy for everybody, always pushing our nation to do better for everybody, for all.

So we give thanks to public servants, we give thanks to innovators, and we give thanks to performers who have captivated our hearts and our minds. The Onion once ran this headline: "Court Rules Meryl Streep Unable To Be Tried by Jury As She Has No Peers." [*Laughter*]

Now, I think this is, like, the third or fourth award Meryl's gotten since I've been in office, and I've said it publicly: I love Meryl Streep. I love her. Her husband knows I love her. Michelle knows I love her. There's nothing either of them can do about it. [*Laughter*]

But she's done it all for her craft. She's sung Abba, which, you know, that's something. [*Laughter*] She learned violin, wore a nun's habit, faced down a charging lion, mastered every accent under the Sun. She inhabits her characters so fully and compassionately, saying, "It's the greatest gift of human beings that we have this power of empathy."

And off screen, as an advocate for women and girls, she uses that gift to help others write the life stories of their choosing and to encourage greater empathy in the rest of us. So Meryl is truly one of America's leading ladies.

And then there's Stevie. Don't get Michelle talking about Stevie Wonder now. [*Laughter*] Early copies of Stevie Wonder's classic album "Talking Book" had a simple message, written in Braille: "Here is my music. It is all I have to tell you how I feel. Know that your love keeps my love strong." This is, by the way, the first album I ever bought with my own money. I was 10 years old, maybe 11, with my own cash. I didn't have a lot of it. And I listened to that—that thing got so worn out, had all scratches. Young people, you won't remember this, but you'd have albums. [*Laughter*] And they'd get scratched.

For more than 50 years, Stevie has channeled his "Innervisions" into messages of hope and healing, in becoming one of the most influential musicians in American history. A musical prodigy with an electrifying voice, Stevie's blend of R&B and jazz and funk and blues and soul and whatever else you've got speaks of love and loss, justice and equality, war and peace. But what really defines Stevie's music is the warmth and humanity that resonates in every note. Some of his songs helped us to fall in love. Others mended our hearts. Some motivated us on the campaign trail. [*Laughter*] And thanks to Stevie, all of us have been moved to "Higher Ground."

Alvin Ailey was born during the Depression in small-town Texas. And by the time he was 27, he had founded a dance company of his own in New York City. It became a place where artists of all races had a home. All that mattered was talent. The dances he choreographed were a blend of ballet, modern, and jazz, and they used the blues and spirituals as well. And through him, African American history was told in a way that it had never been told before: with passionate, virtuoso dance performances that transfixed audiences worldwide.

Alvin said that "dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people." Alvin Ailey delivered, both through his life and through the dance company that will forever bear his name.

When Isabel Allende learned that her grandfather in Chile was dying, she started writing him a letter. Night after night, she returned to it, until, she realized, she was actually writing her first novel. She never really stopped. Her novels and memoirs tell of families, magic, romance, oppression, violence, redemption—all the big stuff. But in her hands, the big became graspable and familiar and human. And exiled from Chile by a military junta, she made the U.S. her home; today, the foundation she created to honor her late daughter helps families worldwide. She begins all her books on January 8, the day she began that letter to her grandfather years ago. "Write to register history," she says. "Write what should not be forgotten."

On the night that the Berlin Wall fell, only one American network anchor was there reporting live. A reporter remembers Ben Bradlee standing in the Post newsroom, watching Tom Brokaw at the Brandenburg Gate and wondering aloud, "How do we beat that?" [*Laughter*] "Brokaw's got this."

At pivotal moments, Tom got it. He reported on Watergate, snuck a camera into Tiananmen Square, sat down for the first one-on-one with Mikhail Gorbachev by an American TV reporter, covered every Presidential election since 1968. We've welcomed him into our home at dinnertime and Sunday mornings. We've trusted him to tell us what we needed to know and to ask questions that needed asking. I know, because I've been on the receiving end of some of those questions. [*Laughter*] Many of him know—many know him as the chronicler of the "Greatest Generation," and today we celebrate him as one of our Nation's greatest journalists.

And we give thanks to trailblazers who bent the arc of our Nation towards justice. In the 1950s, golfer Charlie Sifford won the Negro National Open five times in a row. But by the time he became the first African American to earn a PGA Tour card, most of his best golf was behind him.

On the tour, Charlie was sometimes banned from clubhouse restaurants. Folks threatened him, shouted slurs from the gallery, kicked his ball into the rough. Charlie's laughing about that—my ball is always in the rough. [*Laughter*]

And because golf can be a solitary sport, Charlie didn't have teammates to lean on. But he did have his lovely wife Rose. And he had plenty of guts and grit and that trademark cigar. And Charlie won on the Tour twice, both after age 45. But it was never just about the wins. As Charlie says, "I wasn't just trying to do this for me, I was trying to do it for the world."

Speaking of trailblazers, to some, Marlo Thomas will always be "That Girl," who followed her dreams to New York City and, kind of, was running around Manhattan, having fun, on her own terms. To others, she's the creative mind behind "Free to Be . . . You and Me," whose songs taught a generation of kids that they were strong and beautiful just the way they were.

As a founder of the "Ms. Foundation," Marlo helped turn women's hopes and aspirations into concrete social and economic progress. And she's helped build the hospital her father founded, St. Jude's, into one of the premier pediatric hospitals in the world. She recalls her dad saying: "There are two types of people in the world: the givers and the takers. The takers sometimes eat better, but the givers always sleep better." I love that saying. Marlo Thomas sleeps very well because she's given so much.

Raised on an Oklahoma reservation by a Cheyenne mother and a Hodulgee Muskogee father, Suzan Shown Harjo grew up to become one of the most effective advocates for Native American rights. And through her work in government and as the head of the National Congress of American Indians and the Morning Star Institute, she has helped preserve a million acres of Indian land, helped develop laws preserving tribal sovereignty. She has repatriated sacred cultural items to tribes, while expanding museums that celebrate Native life. Because of Suzan, more young Native Americans are growing up with pride in their heritage and with faith in their future. And she has taught all of us that Native values make American stronger.

On June 21, 1964, three young men—two White and one Black—set out to learn more about the burning of a church in Neshoba County, Mississippi: James Earl Chaney, 21 years old; Andrew Goodman, 20 years old; and Michael Henry Schwerner, 24 years old. Young men. And in that Freedom Summer, these three Americans refused to sit on the sidelines. Their brutal murder by a gang of Ku Klux Klan members shook the conscience of our Nation. It took 44 days to find their bodies, 41 years to bring the lead perpetrator to justice.

And while they are often remembered for how they died, we honor them today for how they lived: with the idealism and the courage of youth. James, Andrew, and Michael could not have known the impact they would have on the civil rights movement or on future generations. And here today, inspired by their sacrifice, we continue to fight for the ideals of equality and justice for which they gave their lives. Today we are honored to be joined by James's daughter Angela, Andrew's brother David, and Michael's wife Rita.

And finally, we give thanks to a person whose love for her family is matched by her devotion to her Nation. To most Americans, Ethel Kennedy is known as a wife, mother, and grandma. And in many ways, it's through these roles that she's made her mark on history. As Bobby Kennedy's partner in life, she shared his commitment to justice. After his death, she continued their work through the center she created in his name, celebrating activists and journalists and educating people around the world about threats to human liberty.

On urgent human rights issues of our time, from juvenile justice to environmental destruction, Ethel has been a force for change in her quiet, flashy—unflashy, unstoppable way. As her family will tell you, and they basically occupy this half of the room—[*laughter*]—you don't mess with Ethel. [*Laughter*]

She's gone to extraordinary lengths to build support for the causes close to her heart, including helping to raise money for ALS research this summer by pouring a bucket of ice water over her head. [*Laughter*] As you may know, she nominated me to do it as well. And as you may know, I chose to write a check instead. [*Laughter*] I grew up in Hawaii. I don't like pouring ice water on top of my head. [*Laughter*] That is probably the only time I've ever said no to Ethel, by the way. [*Laughter*]

Ethel is the matriarch of a patriotic family, and with her encouragement, many of her children and grandchildren are carrying on the Kennedy tradition of public service. She is an emblem of enduring faith and enduring hope, even in the face of unimaginable loss and unimaginable grief. And she has touched the lives of countless people around the world with her generosity and her grace. It gives me great pleasure to present this award, which her brother-in-law, President Kennedy, reestablished more than 50 years ago.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are the recipients of the 2014 President Medal of Freedom. Let's give them a big round of applause. [*Applause*] Yay!

Well, you don't just get applause. You actually get a medal. [*Laughter*] So the—let's read the citations.

[*At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Jillian C. Malzone, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals, assisted by Maj. Matthew R. Newell, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President.*]

The President. Well, what an extraordinary group. Let's give them all a big round of applause one more time.

We thank all of them for the gifts they've given to us: the incredible performances, the incredible innovation, the incredible ideas, the incredible expressions of the human spirit. And not only have they made the world better, but by following their example, they make us a little bit better every single day.

We are truly grateful to them. And on behalf of Michelle and myself, please enjoy the reception. And God bless you all. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:22 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim; former White House Counsel Abner J. Mikva; Robert M. Solow, professor emeritus of economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Don Gummer, husband of actor Mary L. "Meryl" Streep; Tom Brokaw, special correspondent, NBC News; former President Mikhail S. Gorbachev of the Soviet Union; Edgar Ray Killen, who was convicted of manslaughter in the deaths of Michael H. Schwerner, James E. Chaney, and Andrew Goodman on June 21, 2005; Angela Lewis, daughter of Mr. Chaney; and Rita Schwerner-Bender, wife of Mr. Schwerner. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citations.

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